

A month ago, I stood by as a few proud men and women of Southern Missouri raised their right hands, swore their allegiance to our Constitution, and became naturalized American citizens. For this honor, they studied, they served in our communities, and they proved their loyalty to our nation and the ideas it rests upon.

The examination they took asked them to name U.S. territories, quizzed them on the separation of powers in our federal government, and required them to know the first words of our Constitution. It included questions like this one: Under our Constitution, some powers belong to the states. What is one power of the states? A) to make treaties B) to create an army C) to provide schooling and education or D) to coin or print money. Everyone who has ever advocated for local control of our schools would know the answer is C!

And after all the study and all the hard work that went into their citizenship, these new Americans immediately expressed a pride of accomplishment that none of us should ever take for granted.

Likewise, our Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts across the country write letters to elected officials that I am always happy and touched to answer. They get involved in good works in our community. They become active in our public American life long before they are old enough to vote or to volunteer for military service.

Veterans of all ages instill in us an appreciation for the sacrifices that have kept us free for generations. They maintain traditions of honor and respect in our communities, and on Memorial Day, Flag Day, Independence Day and Veterans Day, they can be found in our schools, at our cemeteries, in our parades and with our families.

And students invest time and effort in their civics education to learn the details of how our government works in order to be certain that it will endure. They understand the importance of keeping up with current events as part of staying informed about the choices our country will make that will determine much about their future.

It makes me proud to be an American when I think about all the people who share this great

spirit of patriotism and public service. It makes me proud to know that all these traditions will be carried on because we understand their value to our future. And it makes me proud that so many people work so hard to protect our liberty from tyranny, our free speech and free exercise of religion, our equality before the law.

None of this came easy to our Founders, and it doesn't come easy today, either. To one another, the signers of our Declaration of Independence pledged their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor. And in homes and churches and schools and places of work and community groups across Missouri, we do the same – in traditions old and new, we all proudly wear our own badges of citizenship.